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How One Health Instrumentalizes Nonhuman Animals

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Abstract

This article interrogates anthropocentrism and nonhuman animal instrumentalization in One Health (OH). It argues that OH's approach to human health and zoonosis focuses too narrowly on furthering certain human interests at the expense of nonhuman animals, which is not sustainable, just, or compassionate. This article also offers an alternative vision for protecting and promoting health for all over the long term that includes the human right to self-determination and the nonhuman animal right to not be exploited or abused. This rights-based approach recognizes that the root causes of zoonosis should be identified and addressed via policies and actions that challenge nonhuman animal exploitation.

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Anthropocentrism in One Health

One Health (OH) is an approach to health that views the health of humans, nonhuman animals, and ecosystems as interconnected.¹ Conceptually, it **emphasizes interdisciplinary approaches** to global health challenges. The World Health Organization notes that OH “is particularly relevant for food and water safety, nutrition, the control of zoonoses ... pollution management, and combatting antimicrobial resistance.”² This statement of priorities is reflected in the growing literature on OH and pandemics, wherein the emphasis has often been on nonhuman animals as vectors of disease and resulting poor health for humans and on antimicrobial resistance and food-borne illnesses from the production and consumption of meat, dairy, and other animal products.^{3,4}

In 2022, the Quadripartite—a partnership of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the United Nations Environment Programme, the World Health Organization, and the World Organisation for Animal Health—announced its 5-year One Health Joint Plan of Action to “collectively better prevent, predict, detect, and respond to health threats” and “improve the health of humans, animals, plants, and the environment, while contributing to sustainable development.”⁵ Notwithstanding these

goals, the plan prioritizes zoonotic and vector-borne diseases that affect humans, food safety for humans, and antimicrobial resistance.⁵ With the world still struggling with a global pandemic of zoonotic origin, these priorities are timely and necessary but also shortsighted. Indeed, OH has been criticized for viewing animal health through an anthropocentric frame of reference as a means to the end of human health.^{6,7}

We start from an assumption that all animals, human and nonhuman, have basic rights to life, freedom, and the opportunity to flourish.^{8,9,10,11} What those rights require on the ground varies by species depending on their needs and capacities, but, minimally, **respecting the rights of animals** assumes that their interests and lives are not automatically subjugated to human interests. The stated goals of OH are consistent with our assumption. Nevertheless, although OH approaches commonly mention animal welfare, they have given minimal attention to animal health for the sake of animals.^{10,12} The anthropocentrism for which OH has been criticized instrumentalizes animals by recognizing their value only insofar as it contributes to human flourishing, thereby reinforcing the very anthropocentrism that justifies exploitation of farmed animals, encroachment on animal habitats, and the wildlife trade that OH purports to address. Like these exploitative practices, an anthropocentric OH accepts animal suffering if it serves specific human-centered goals, and it challenges harmful and exploitative practices only insofar as they fail to serve human-centered goals. Thus, threats posed by climate change to wild animal populations and threats to the climate from large-scale animal agriculture are important within OH approaches primarily because they have negative effects for humans—including health effects and threats to property and financial interests—and not because they cause significant harm to animals and destroy their habitats. Because OH approaches generally lack an ethical framework^{13,14} through which to view health in the context of rights and interspecies justice, they fail to recognize that animals have moral claims to health and well-being in their own right.

One Health and Zoonotic Disease

The OH approach to preventing zoonotic diseases is instructive. Zoonoses occur through human interaction with animals, such as through intensive animal farming practices; through human encroachment on and exploitation of the natural habitats of animals; and through the capture, transport, export, and confinement of animals for human use and consumption.^{15,16} Capps et al argue that within an anthropocentric OH framework, strategies for responding to zoonotic pandemics “have tended to map mechanisms of disease transmission, and identify problems and solutions from the standpoint of human interests.”¹⁷ Culling animals to protect supposed human interests is one example. On average, hundreds of thousands of animals are killed each day to control zoonotic outbreaks.^{17,18,19}

The 2022 to 2023 outbreak of a highly pathogenic avian influenza has prompted the killing of tens of millions of farmed birds, including millions of healthy birds, in the United States.²⁰ In Spain, more than 50 000 farmed mink were killed after an outbreak of H5N1 avian influenza,²¹ and tens of millions of farmed mink were gassed to death in the Netherlands after SARS-CoV-2 was detected on fur farms.²² In Norway, beginning in 2015, an attempt to stop the spread of livestock-associated methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (LA-MRSA) resulted in the culling of all pigs on farms where LA-MRSA was detected.²³ It should be underscored that LA-MRSA is not a health threat to pigs. Rather, Norwegian health authorities sought to avoid hospital-acquired LA-MRSA infections introduced by farm worker patients infected through their work.²⁴ (Ironically, it was also farm workers who introduced LA-MRSA infections to pigs.²⁴) This “search and

destroy policy” was viewed as cost-effective because the overall prevalence of LA-MRSA on Norwegian pig farms was low, while the cost of prevention in hospitals was high.²⁵ None of these animals were killed for their own sake—many were not infected—but rather to limit threats to human health and economic interests. By contrast, in the Netherlands, where the prevalence of LA-MRSA in pig herds was close to 70%, culling would have been financially harmful for the pig industry and thus was not adopted.²⁴

The US Agency for International Development describes its One Health approach to preventing zoonosis through bat-borne Nipah virus among pigs in Thailand in stark economic terms,²⁶ while also making spurious claims about the role of animal agriculture in food security.^{27,28} (Numerous studies have demonstrated that global food security is better addressed through plant-based agriculture because of land, grain, and water **inefficiencies associated with animal agriculture**.²⁸) By linking pig farms via app to a national surveillance database, the agency claims that “140,000 pig farms in Thailand are continuously monitoring disease risk, providing an early warning for spillover of viruses and improving farm biosecurity and management. By safeguarding the more than \$3 billion pork industry, this app is contributing to Thailand’s food security, economic stability, and livelihoods.”²⁶ Reflecting on an analogous situation in which the United Kingdom culled badgers to prevent the spread of bovine tuberculosis in farmed cattle, Lederman et al argue that culling not only violates the interests and denies the moral value of individual animals, but also “arguably fails to consider the inherent value of ecosystems ... and how the interests of other living beings are affected by the absence of badgers.”¹⁸

Toward a Rights-Based Ethical Framework

Without an ethical framework that values animal life and flourishing, OH can only trivially recognize that human, nonhuman, and environmental health are interconnected. It is thus hard to see how OH in practice is distinct from traditional public health approaches that focus on the health of human populations.^{17,24,29} An OH approach to zoonoses that emphasizes the protection of animal-exploiting industries does not and cannot interrogate the root causes of zoonoses and pandemics—the subjugation of animal rights to a subset of human interests. As long as OH remains narrowly and anthropocentrically focused—as long, as Garnier et al note, as a “development paradigm, prioritizing the pursuit of wealth and food security”¹⁴ dominates—it will be unable to challenge unjust and unethical practices and will struggle to implement a morally sustainable, fair, and compassionate paradigm for addressing the climate, biodiversity, and health crises that threaten all species.²⁸ The limitations of an anthropocentric OH mean it can only tinker around the edges of systemic and complex problems without addressing the real and pressing core issues. By viewing animals merely as threats to (or a means to) human health, it fails to appreciate how human activities pose a profound threat to all life.

Lederman et al argue that a “One Health ethics” already contains the tools to move from “an anthropocentric approach to disease” toward one that can take into account “the interests of animals, all living things or the biotic community as a whole.”¹⁸ An OH approach that foregrounds justice (sometimes called Just One Health) asserts that humans and other animals have rights not to be subject to exploitation and abuse and calls for policies and actions that advance interspecies justice.³⁰ Foregrounding justice in OH provides tools for exposing the root causes of challenges like zoonosis and climate change in human activities that exploit not only animals and ecosystems, but also marginalized humans.^{10,29,31} As an example, an ethically grounded and just approach to

zoonosis that recognizes that animals have their own rights and interests—their own claims to justice—would prioritize prevention of zoonotic outbreaks by tackling their roots: the exploitation, industrialization, and moral instrumentalization of animals by humans. This approach might be operationalized by, for example, phasing out industrialized farming practices—including the transport, import, and export of billions of farmed animals—that drive problems like antimicrobial resistance, food-borne illness, and zoonoses. It would acknowledge that the destruction of rainforests and other habitats is driven by the world’s appetite for cheap meat³² and that this destruction is fundamentally unjust: it accelerates climate change, endangers wildlife, and harms marginalized Indigenous peoples by destroying the lands on which they live.³³

An OH framework that recognizes and respects the rights of life, freedom, and flourishing for animals and *all* humans must confront the reality that **problems like climate change** and zoonotic pandemics cannot be controlled or limited by select human-centered solutions because, fundamentally, privileged humans and their interests are the problem.³⁴ By foregrounding ethics and justice, unjust trade-offs like culling, which sacrifice animal lives for economic interests, can be interrogated, along with the tolerance for the instrumentalization and exploitation of animals *and* humans within OH. Doing so would enhance the ability of OH to fully realize the goal of approaching problems like zoonoses holistically, systemically, structurally, and sustainably by recognizing that animal and human interests in health, life, and flourishing are only advanced by solutions that promote rights and justice for everyone.

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